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Eleventh United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names
New York, 8-17 August 2017
Item 4 of the provisional agenda*
Reflection on the past, present and future: the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names

Composition, history and contribution of the Norden Division

Summary**

The Norden Division is one of the 24 linguistic/geographical divisions of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names, comprising Denmark (including the Faroe Islands and Greenland), Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden.

All the member countries represent Scandinavian languages, but Finland participates only in relation to one of its two national languages, Swedish. Its other national language, Finnish, and the Sami language are Uralic languages. Sami is spoken across borders, covering the northern parts of Finland, Norway and Sweden.

The Chair of the Division usually serves for the period between two United Nations Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names. The first Chair was Per Hovda (Norway). He was followed by Allan Rostvik (Sweden), Eeva Maria Närhi (Finland), Botolv Helleland (Norway), Hans Ringstam (Sweden), Sirkka Paikkala (Finland) and Peder Gammeltoft (Denmark), with the last-mentioned serving for two terms. Ingvil Nordland (Norway) will serve as Chair after the Eleventh Conference.

The Division has had its own website since 2008.[1] It is organized in accordance with resolution I/4 on national standardization, adopted in 1967. Its aim is to present concise information about issues pertaining to the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names within the Division area, with links to additional information regarding the Group and the national authorities of the Division's members. Peder Gammeltoft is currently in charge of the site.

* E/CONF.105/1.

** The full report was prepared by Botolv Helleland (Norway). The report is available from https://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/ungegnConf11.html, in the language of submission only, as document E/CONF.105/59/CRP.59.

[1] See http://nordendivision.nfi.ku.dk/.

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At the First Conference, in 1967, Denmark, Norway and Sweden gave an account of a common Scandinavian transcription for geographical names written in the Cyrillic alphabet, stating that similar work for transcription from other writing systems, including Arabic and Chinese, was in progress. They also reported on a common spelling of the Skagerrak. At the Fourth Conference, the Division reported on a list of Nordic forms of States, inhabitant names and related adjectives.

At the meeting of the Division in March 1992, held in Helsinki, the participants discussed the reduction of exonyms in line with the resolutions of the Conferences. Other topics were the stability of the romanization systems and how to trigger the implementation of the Group's recommendations in internal institutions.

Amendments to the statute of the Group with regard to the cultural value of geographical names were presented at the Division's meeting in 2005. They were presented again at the twenty-ninth session of the Group, held in April 2016 in Bangkok, by the Working Group on Geographical Names as Cultural Heritage.

Over the years, there has been close cooperation between the Division and the Baltic Division. In 1997, toponymic courses were organized in Riga, with support from experts from Finland, Norway and Sweden. In 2013, a joint day of meetings of both divisions was held in Tallinn, followed by a seminar on the integration of onomastic data into geospatial infrastructure.

In October 2010, a joint event between the Division and the Working Group on Toponymic Terminology was held at the Institute for Language and Folklore in Uppsala, Sweden. A joint meeting of the Division and the Working Group on Geographical Names as Cultural Heritage was held in September 2015 at the Department of Nordic Research at the University of Copenhagen. It was also attended by members of the Working Group on Evaluation and Implementation and the Working Group on Publicity and Funding.

At the Fourth Conference, the Division reported that toponymic guidelines for cartography had been presented by all Nordic countries. Several countries have since submitted updated versions.

The Division has taken several initiatives to promote geographical names in minority areas, such as the publication of a Nordic place names database and a corresponding web service in 1999. The web project was coordinated and the database hosted by the National Land Survey of Finland. The Division is also looking into producing a web-based resource for minority geographical names within the Division area. The use of minority names is based on the laws and/or regulations of the countries concerned.

The report includes a table showing the main elements and steps in the standardization process in the member countries of the Division.